



Eastman CCI February 15, 2007

On Friday, February 2, 2007, a citizen of Eastman, GA contacted me with concerns about several employees and colleagues diagnosed with cancer in her building at the Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA). She was concerned that the building, previously a car dealership, was causing cancer among employees and colleagues working in the building. We discussed the previous use of the building, and she told me about the different types of cancer individuals working in the building had.

I did not identify any specific or suspected environmental contamination that may be an exposure pathway for chemicals that can cause cancer. I searched the Hazardous Site Inventory and CERCLIS, and there were no hazardous waste sites within one mile of the RESA building. I contacted the Georgia Department of Human Resources (GDHR) Cancer Control Section for statistics on cancer cases in her zip code. In summary, there are no cancer types that are found for the county or zip code that have significantly higher rates or numbers of cases than found across the state.

This technical assistance report is intended to address health concerns, and to provide information relating to cancer. It is not intended to serve the purpose of or to influence any other environmental investigation such as risk assessment, nor is it not intended to serve the purpose of addressing liability, zoning, or other non-health issues.

Based on our conversation, I sent the resident copies of our brochure, *Cancer and the Environment*, and a letter which summarized our discussion and the cancer data, and included the following information about cancer:

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS) and other sources, one out of three Americans now living will eventually develop cancer. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States following heart disease. Given the frequency of cancer diagnosis among all Americans, it is not surprising to know that many people in your neighborhood or workplace have cancer.

Cancer is a group of more than 100 diseases characterized by uncontrolled growth and spread of

abnormal cells. Different types of cancer have differing rates of occurrence, different causes, and varying chances for survival. Therefore, we cannot assume that all the different types of cancer in a community or workplace share a common cause or can be prevented by a single intervention.

While cancer occurs in people of all ages, new cases of most types of cancer rise sharply among people over 45 years of age. When neighborhood or workplace consists primarily of people over the age of 45 (and even more so over the age of 60), we can expect more cases of cancer than in a neighborhood or workplace with younger ages. However, cancer is also the second leading cause of death in children.

Cancer may be caused by a variety of factors acting alone or together, usually over a period of many years. Scientists estimate that most cases of cancer are due to lifestyle factors which increase the risk for cancer including: smoking cigarettes, drinking heavily, and diet (for example, excess calories, high fat, and low fiber). Other important cancer risk factors include reproductive patterns, sexual behavior, and sunlight exposure. A family history of cancer may also increase a person's chances of developing cancer.

Many people believe that cancer is usually caused by toxic substances in the home, community, or workplace. Although we do not know the exact impact now of environmental pollutants on cancer development, less than 10% of cancer cases are estimated to be related to toxic exposures.

For those instances in which a cancer is due to a contact with a cancer-causing agent, the disease does not develop immediately. Instead, often 10 to 30 years elapse between the exposure to a carcinogen (a cancer causing substance) and medical diagnosis of cancer. This makes it very difficult to pinpoint what caused the cancer because the types we see now are usually related to a lifetime of certain habits or exposures to carcinogens many years ago.

Since the 1970s when state cancer registries were first being organized, many public health scientists and



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citizens hoped that anecdotal observations of clusters of cancer in the community might lead to prevention of new cases via discovery of specific causes of these diagnoses. Since then, thousands of investigations have taken place throughout the country, mainly conducted by state, local, or federal agencies. With one or two possible exceptions involving childhood cancer cases, none of these investigations have lead to the identification of the causes of any of these possible clusters, even when a statistically elevated number of cancer cases in a geographic area could be documented. The Georgia Division of Public Health is developing strategies for active cancer surveillance.

We hope that once we achieve complete, accurate and timely reporting, the Georgia Comprehensive Cancer Registry will be able to systematically identify cancer patterns in the entire Georgia population. This systematic approach to monitoring cancer trends in our state will lead to more opportunities for prevention and control of cancer in Georgia.